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ABSTRACT

Professors at a large, northwest, state-supported university selected communication between instructor and student as the most important function of grades. Second in importance was the predictive function of grades, i.e., providing the student and others with information for making educational and vocational decisions. Third in importance was the grade as historical record. This student-centered attitude towards evaluation was also reflected in their favorite choice of model for assigning grades, agreeing with Arrington that mastery grading emphasizes communication between teacher and student at the expense of communication with other groups. Seventy percent of this sample of 700 (from 2,200) had adopted the University's new decimal grading system which they overwhelmingly believed would be better than the previous letter grades. Rather than using letter grades (A=4.0, B=3.0), faculty could choose to assign more precise number grades, to one decimal place (3.7=A-, 3.3=B+, etc.). The fact that 83% of the faculty considered grade inflation a major or somewhat serious problem may be linked with the large percentage opting for the new decimal grading system, but this system should not be construed as an effort to improve the declining predictive power of grades. (Author/MV)

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College Grades:

What Do Professors Intend to Communicate to Whom?

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A survey of faculty opinion as to the multiple purposes of grading revealed the most important function of grades was felt to be communication between instructor and student. Seventy percent of this sample of 700 (from 2,200) had adopted the University's new decimal grading system which they overwhelmingly believed would be better than the previous letter grades. The expected relationship between considering grade inflation a problem and favoring the new system did not materialize; however, more institution and record-centered faculty were more concerned about grade inflation.

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College Grades: What Do Professors Intend to Communicate to Whom?

Patricia W. Lunneborg

Arrington has raised the question of the primary function of college grades (AAUP Bulletin, April 1977, pp. 53-55). While McKeachie's provocative article ("College Grades: A Rationale and Mild Defense," AAUP Bulletin, October 1976, pp. 320-322) espoused the view that grades are primarily predictive in purpose, i.e., used to make decisions about a student's future performance, Arrington stressed that grades are basically a communication between teacher and student. Thus, what is communicated should not be so much predictive as it should be a clear statement of what the student has learned. In this light, mastery grading, contract grading, and other innovative practices were defended as improving this communication at the expense of communication to other groups. McKeachie, in contrast, has taken such nontraditional practices to task for providing less efficient predictors and having contributed to the widespread phenomenon of grade inflation.

What might a survey of faculty opinion reveal? If the multiple purposes of grades were presented to them with instructions to weight their relative importance, would communication to students have greater value than communication to other teachers, administrators, employers, etc.? Would a student-centered conception of grading be meaningfully related to other grading issues such as choice of model for assigning grades, a "liberal" attitude toward grading, or one's estimate of the seriousness of the "problem" of grade inflation?

In conjunction with assessing the acceptance of a new grading policy at the University of Washington it was possible to inquire into the purposes of grades perceived by faculty. The new grading policy is linked in the minds of some (particularly students) with grade inflation, and indeed it has the appearance of a step in the conservative direction. Beginning summer 1976 our old system of letter grades (in which A = 4.0, B = 3.0, etc.) was abandoned and three options put in its place. Instructors were to assign numbers instead of letters, numbers to one decimal place. If they wished to stay within the old system, they could simply continue to report 4.0, 3.0, etc. If they wished now to make the slightly finer delineations of pluses and minuses, they could assign a 3.7 for an A-, a 2.3 for a C+, etc. And lastly, they had the full range of tenths at their disposal if they judged that this mode would lead to the best possible communication.

Early in winter quarter 1977 the faculty was mailed a survey concerned with their implementation of the new decimal grading system during autumn quarter. How many had gone for it? Did they consider grade inflation much of a problem? To what did they attribute it? What did they use as sources of information in assigning grades? And, crucially, how much importance did they attach to the various purposes of grading--student-centered ("communicates to student how much learning was achieved"), institution-centered ("provides student with predictive feedback for making educational or vocational decisions"), and record-centered ("provides an historic record of student educational experience"). Of 2,200 faculty, slightly over 700 responded within a month and the proportions of full, associate, and assistant professors (38%, 32%, and 30%, respectively) in this sample closely parallel the proportions in the total group (41%, 30%, and 29%).

The first surprise was the large proportion of faculty deciding to adopt the full new decimal system, 70%. There was no relationship between this decision, however, and such background variables as rank, years taught, level of class, class size, or model for assigning grades (inspection, distribution, mastery, and individual assessment). There was, naturally, a highly significant relationship between the decision and the belief that it represented an improvement over the old system. Eighty-four percent of the faculty felt the new system would be a "considerable improvement" or "moderately beneficial"; 16% rated it "no improvement" or "detrimental." Faculty were asked how important various influences had been in making up their minds and there were slight tendencies for those who opted <u>against</u> the decimal system to have considered departmental policy and faculty opinion less, and student opinion more. However, in both the for and against groups two-thirds of the weight in deciding they gave to themselves ("my own analysis").

The proportions responding to the question "Do you consider the rise in grade point average in recent years to have been..." were: 24% "a major problem"; 59% "somewhat serious"; 14% of "of no consequence"; and 3% "a positive sign." (Curiously, perhaps because of the disproportionate number adopting the new system, the expected relationship between considering grade inflation a problem and opting for the new system did not reach statistical significance.)

Faculty perceptions of the reasons behind grade inflation can best be presented simply as a ranking of their overall weightings of the contribution of

eight possible factors. The top three reasons for grade inflation, representing 60% of the weight assigned, were: (1) lower performance standards, (2) less acceptance by faculty of an evaluative role, and (3) increased student emphasis on grade-getting behavior. Next followed "growing faculty concern for (their) student ratings," "stronger faculty attitude that grading hinders learning," and "the shift from traditional grades (pass/fail), etc." Least weight was assigned as sources of grade inflation to their being "better prepared students" or "more effective teaching."

How much importance do faculty attach to various sources of information in assigning grades? In descending order with the average weight in parentheses (they divided up 100 points among the 12 sources), the bases for grades were: objective exams (37), essay exams (17), term papers (11), recitations/problem sets (7), term projects (6), class discussion (5), laboratory performance (5), other (4), effort (3), attendance (2), laboratory reports (2), and ratings by TA's (1). Objective exams were relied on to a greater extent the more senior the faculty and also tended to be more important to those favoring the new system. The model adopted most frequently by the faculty for combining all this information into a grade may come as a surprise: it was "mastery" defined as "levels of achievement for certain grades are well established." Fifty-one percent indicated mastery as their chief model. "Inspection" was next most popular (30%), followed by "distribution" where "roughly a certain fraction of A's, B's, etc. are expected" (12%), and the "individual" model where growth of the individual student was most important (7%).

Now to the purposes of grades. Here faculty divided up 100 points among nine purposes, three each for the three broad categories. First, there were no discernible differences among the weights given by faculty when grouped by either rank or by decision. All groups gave over half of the 100 points to student-centered purposes--to tell students how much was learned, to provide students with rewards and warnings, and to motivate students. The next most weight went to the three institution-related purposes--to provide students with predictive feedback for educational/vocational decisions, to provide educational institutions with this same information, and to provide potential employers as well with predictive data. Third in importance, with an average of 18 points, was the purpose of grades as an important document--to tell instructors about teaching effectiveness, to afford an accounting to society, and to provide an historic record.

The consensus among the faculty that grades are primarily a communication between instructor and student was particularly revealed when faculty were grouped on such variables as years taught, level of class, course emphasis on skill acquisition (vs. conceptual attainment), and perception of oneself as a liberal vs. conservative grader. For no subgrouping did the student-centered purposes sum up to less than 50 points! Thus, while liberals, in accord with expectation, gave more weight to student-centered purposes than conservative graders, we are talking about 61 points vs. 51 points.

The faculty breakdown that produced the greatest differences was grouping on the basis of a survey item concerning the seriousness of the grade inflation problem. This is what the distribution of points looked like.

Average Weights Assigned by Faculty to Three Functions of Grades

Grade inflation rated as...	Student-centered purposes	Institution-centered purposes	Record-centered purposes
Major problem	47	31	20
Somewhat serious	56	23	19
Of no consequence	58	21	16
A positive sign	63	23	15

It should come as no surprise to see that those who felt the rise in GPA was a major problem were less student-centered and more institution-minded than faculty less troubled by grade inflation.

To summarize:

(1) This sample of faculty at a large, northwest, state-supported university was found to be very student-centered about grades, assigning the greatest weight to the purpose of pure communication between instructor and student. Second in importance was the predictive function of grades, i.e., providing the student and other groups with information for making educational/vocational decisions. Third in importance was the grade as historical record of use to the faculty, the university administration, and society.

(2) This student-centered attitude towards evaluation was also reflected in their favorite choice of model for assigning grades, assuming Arrington is right that mastery grading emphasizes communication between teacher and student at the expense of communication with other groups.

(3) The fact that 83% of the faculty considered grade inflation a major or somewhat serious problem may be linked with the large percentage (70%) opting for a new, more precise, decimal grading system, but this should not be construed as an effort to improve the declining predictive power of grades. We must conclude that the faculty over-whelmingly believed that the new system would be an improvement (84%) for students' sakes, i.e., that it would communicate better how much learning took place, improve the motivational power of grades, and perhaps even enhance mastery as a model for evaluating student performance.